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ABSTRACT

A study tested the validity of arguments leveled against reader-response methods of reading instruction, which--if these criticisms are correct--would produce lower comprehension scores on objective tests and less accurate recall from students. Subjects, 84 college freshmen in four developmental reading classes, were taught using one of four methods of instruction: read-respond (using a five-step technique compatible with Stanley Fish's theory of interpretive communities), read-take notes, read-lecture, and read-discuss. All students read the same narrative and expository materials. They were then tested using a delayed multiple-choice test and a written free recall. Results showed no significant differences among groups regarding multiple-choice test performance. However, significant differences were found in three areas: (1) total number of ideas recalled for both narrative and expository materials, (2) number of correct ideas recalled for both narrative and expository materials, and (3) total incorrect statements for narrative text. These results indicate that reader-response techniques (including interpretations by peers, teachers, scholars, and critics) proved as successful as more traditional methods in facilitating objective comprehension and accurate recall of ideas. Further research on reader-response techniques is needed. (A description of the five-step technique used, a three-page list of references, and a master list of project-related technical reports are appended. (LLZ)

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Reader Response In The College Developmental Classroom

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READER RESPONSE IN THE COLLEGE DEVELOPMENTAL CLASSROOM

Judging from the frequent publication of journal articles and recent books examining the pedagogical aspects of reader response criticism, one could conclude that the topic of literary theory and reading instruction continues to merit investigation. Many studies have validated the importance of analyzing readers' responses to text in the instruction of reading (Ericson, 1983; McCormick, 1985; Petersen, 1982; Purves & Rippere, 1968; Tierney et al., 1983). Elementary teachers, particularly, have emphasized student response as part of the integrated language arts curriculum, and studies documenting the importance of developing language arts skills through systematic recording and analyzing of student responses to text are prolific at this level (Hansen, 1983; Biggs, et al., 1981, 1982; Hickman, 1984, Langer, 1984; Wagner, 1985; Solsken, 1985).

Recognizing the importance of student response and the significant influence of literary criticism's theory of response,

many secondary and post-secondary teachers of reading and English have now begun to incorporate methods of cultivating response to texts into their lessons (Benton, 1984; Bergstron, 1983; Blatt; & Rosen, 1984; Chase & Hynd, 1985; Fink, 1985; Petrosky, 1982; Purves, 1984). In short, these teachers are now borrowing theories from literary criticism to use as models for reading/writing instruction, and literary critics are making curricular recommendations to secondary and post-secondary teachers (Bleich, 1975, 1978; Fish, 1980; Holland, 1975; Holland & Kintgen, 1984; Iser, 1979). The recommendations are that teachers accept the idiosyncratic nature of responses to text, deemphasize instruction that presumes authorial intent, and emphasize instruction that enables students to blend their personal perceptions and knowledge with the content of the text and the responses of others.

These recommendations, however, have not been received without criticism. Jones (1985), in speaking of the use of reader response methods adopted by many classroom teachers says, "More [teachers] have remained convinced that there is something very limiting, even debilitating in placing primary importance on meanings that are generated almost exclusively out of the experiences that readers bring to the text regardless of possible authorial intentions"(p. 32). Jones' argument resembles objections leveled against reader response theory since its genesis. Wimsatt & Beardsley (1949) and other formalist critics attacked reader response tenets for rejecting the assumption that a final objective meaning resides in the text itself. Reader

response methods, they feared, allowed chaotic, solopsistic, idiosyncratic interpretations of texts. The rebuttal to these arguments against reader response has been that textual meaning can be nothing more than subjective, and that "the objectivity of the text is an illusion" (Fish, 1980, p. 82). Tompkins (1980) states that "the possibility of neutral descriptions or of values that are absolute, or in other words, of statements that exist apart from a human structure of interests" must be rejected (p. 25). According to reader response theory, then, the challenge in understanding how text is comprehended is to understand better the "human structure of interests," or according to Stanley Fish, the interpretive community shaping the reader's comprehension. Further, McCormick (1985) defends the use of reader response methods in the classroom because they allow students "to recognize that critics [and teachers], like themselves, are influenced by cultural and literary assumptions, and, consequently, have no greater access to the 'true' meaning of a text than student readers" even though such experts are more skilled and persuasive in conveying their interpretations(p.82).

It was the purpose of this study then, to test, in a college developmental reading classroom, the validity of arguments leveled against reader response methods of reading instruction. If these arguments have merit, then an instructional method based upon theories borrowed from Stanley Fish (1980) would yield lower comprehension scores on objective testing and less accurate recalls of information in the text than instructional methods that were more traditional. In other words, students would be

allowing their idiosyncratic interpretations of text to override more general interpretations and understandings of textual material.

METHOD

Subjects and Procedure

Eighty-four developmental studies freshmen in four intact reading classrooms participated in this investigation. The teacher in each section employed a different method of reading instruction using the same narrative and expository texts. These methods were: (1) read-respond; (2) read-take notes; (3) read-lecture; and (4) read-discuss. The read-respond group used a five step technique for college developmental reading instruction which was developed by the researchers and was compatible with Stanley Fish's theory of interpretive communities. All writing concerning textual material was collected as completed and not returned to the students. Figure 1 describes this instructional method. The read-take notes group was instructed in how to take notes from text and then asked to take notes after reading each narrative and expository text. Notes were collected by the instructor and not seen again by students. The read-lecture group read the text and then listened to the teacher lecture on the content of each text and issues related to text content. Student questions were answered by the instructor, but there was no further instruction nor discussion. In the read-discuss group, the reading of each text was followed by an informal, non-directive discussion concerning the text. No writing nor

notetaking was allowed, and the teacher gave no organized lecture about the text. Students in none of the four groups were permitted to take the texts outside of class. Also, attempts were made to assure that the amount of class time spent on the texts were roughly equivalent across groups.

All groups read four expository texts consisting of 6-8 page excerpts from an introductory psychology book (Lahey, 1983) for a four-week period, then read four short stories of comparable length for the next four week period. One text was read per week, and, at the end of each week, students took a researcher-designed multiple-choice test on the material. A delayed (one week) multiple-choice test and a written free-recall were completed on two of the texts--"Psychology in Business" and "Son in the Afternoon."

Scoring

All multiple choice tests for each group were scored. The delayed written free-recalls for each group were analyzed as follows. On the expository text, 6 expert readers were asked to rate information presented in the text as general or specific. An example of a general idea would be, "Psychologists are responsible for the selection and evaluation of employees." An example of a specific idea would be, "The in-basket consists of having employees demonstrate their ability to make administrative decisions." A coding matrix was then constructed upon which topical sections from the text were placed vertically, and specificity levels were placed horizontally. For the narrative text, a thematic story grammar was constructed by the

researchers. Expert readers generated themes from the narrative text. These themes (e.g. inequality, revenge, guilt) were placed across the top of a coding matrix. Delineated aspects of Mandler & Johnson's (1977) story grammar (setting, initiating event, internal response, outcome, etc.) were placed vertically. Idea units in students' free recalls for both the expository and narrative texts were then tallied as correct literal, correct inferential, incorrect inferential, incorrect, and vague in the appropriate matrix square. Agreement concerning placement of each tally was negotiated among the researchers.

RESULTS

ANCOVAS were computed, with SAT-Verbal scores as covariates. No significant differences among groups were found regarding multiple-choice test performance after reading either expository or narrative text. However, significant differences were found in the total number of ideas recalled with both expository and narrative text (expository text--$F<3,66> = 3.10$, $p < .05$; narrative text--$F<3,66> = 4.24$, $p < .05$). Also, there were significant differences in the number of correct ideas recalled for both expository and narrative text (expository text--$F<3,71> = 4.21$, $p < .05$; narrative text--$F<3,71> = 4.84$, $p < .05$). Finally, there were significant differences in the total incorrect statements made by the four groups for the narrative but not the expository text (narrative--$F<3,71> = 3.69$, $p < .05$; expository text--$F<3,781> = 2.16$, $p > .05$). Regarding total number of ideas and total correct ideas, it appears that students in the read-take notes, read lecture, and read-respond groups

generally did better than students in the read-discuss group. As for the number of incorrect ideas recalled, students in the read-lecture group listed more incorrect ideas than the other three groups.

Anticipation-reaction guides completed by students in the read-respond group (see Figure 1, section 1) were analyzed for changes in attitudes/beliefs regarding issues presented in the texts. On the average, students changed attitudes on at least one of the five items for every text presented to them. There were differences, however, between changes after reading expository and changes after reading narrative text. It appears that students were much more willing to change their minds concerning issues in expository text than they were issues in narrative text ($F<3,138> = 15.63, p < .001$)

DISCUSSION

The analyses do not indicate support for the criticism leveled at reader response. With this population, reader response techniques proved just as successful as more traditional techniques in facilitating "objective" comprehension as measured by multiple choice tests as well as the accurate recall of ideas from both expository and narrative text. Rather than assume that response methods limit and confine students or allow "anything goes" reactions, it is advisable to look carefully at the definition of a response method. In this study, response was not defined as the expression of individual preferences and perceptions only, even though these were accepted as being valid.

Including but not restricted to personal reactions, response was more broadly defined as incorporating interpretations of texts by peers, teachers, scholars, and critics in the context of social and historical issues. Perhaps this conception of response was responsible for its success.

The change of ideas and beliefs after reading a text (in the read-respond group) provides support for the contention that response techniques are capable of providing students with changes in or widening of perspectives beyond the personal level. It was found that ideas contained in the anticipation-reaction guides completed by the read-respond group were changed more regarding issues in expository text than issues in narrative text. There are several possible reasons for that finding. For one, the issues were qualitatively different. Students would naturally hold stronger beliefs regarding what makes a person evil than they would the characteristics of a good boss. Further, in expository text, factual evidence is usually given for the issues presented. In the short stories used for narrative text, however, fictional experiences were provided as evidence for the issues presented. It might be that the students in this study were swayed more by factual presentation of evidence. In addition, students may have employed different styles of reading to expository and narrative text. Rosenblatt (1978) distinguishes between efferent reading, which is done for the purpose of remembering the text, and aesthetic reading, which is done for entertainment or distraction. Because of school demands, students are used to applying an efferent reading style

to expository text and more inclined to read narratives aesthetically. Consequently, it is probable that students learned more and were influenced more by the expository text simply because they expected to be. Evidence for the change of beliefs found in the anticipation-reaction guides would be stronger if delayed anticipation-reaction exercises on the issues were administered documenting the amount of change persistence.

There were several limitations to this study, however. First, there was no control for the effect of teacher. It is probable that the read-discuss group recalled fewer ideas because of this limitation. Second, there was no control for the effect of writing ability. Since developmental studies freshmen enrolled in reading courses may be at several levels of proficiency in writing, it might be of interest to block students on whether they were enrolled in a lower-level or upper-level basic writing course. Finally, multiple-choice tests and written recalls may be insensitive measures of the improvement in reading skills achieved through reader response or other approaches. It is possible that case studies, including lengthier writing samples, interviews, and recorded oral responses, would yield greater insight into the effectiveness of each teaching technique. While the limitations to this study are significant, the treatments used, however, do appear to be ecologically valid in that reading instruction did seem to proceed along the lines of the standard classroom practice.

In conclusion, comparison of reader response techniques with

more traditional forms of college instructional techniques deserves additional attention. Also, the focus of research in response needs to be on the documentation of the kinds of responses typical of varying populations of students at different developmental/sociocultural levels and with different kinds of texts. Personality or cognitive style variables, levels of prior knowledge, and interest level may contribute to variations in response as well. Finally, along with metacognitive studies, response studies could yield important information regarding the comprehension process.

Figure 1

Reader Response Technique

Understanding One's Own Interpretive Community:

1. Identifying

A. Before reading, the student accesses his or her own opinions and knowledge of the subject matter or issues that will be encountered in the text through the use of anticipation-reaction guides. These guides present issues dealt with in the text in the form of statements. Students read these statements, agree or disagree with them, then discuss their beliefs with others in the class.

B. After reading the text, each student is asked to make a list, without referring to the text, of all he or she can remember about the selection and all immediate reactions.

2. Structuring

This step involves an organization and synthesis of the lists generated in the identification stage. Students corroborate their individual reactions with the reactions of peers by working in small groups. Rereading of the text for verification and validation occurs in this stage. Students may make outlines, maps, charts, etc. illustrating important perceptions.

3. Expressing

Groups of students are required to consolidate the views of their peers with their own personal views regarding the texts through discussion and, subsequently, in writing.

A. A selected group puts the list, outline, map, or

diagram generated in the structuring stage on the board and explains it to the class.

B. Students are asked to write a response paper, either stating what they feel to be the "meaning" of the text, or taking a stand with regard to an issue related to the text. Selected papers are shared in class, with students critiquing them either verbally or in writing.

Understanding Other Interpretive Communities:

4. Analyzing

Teachers now fill in the "gaps" between student interpretations and the interpretations of the academic community, other critics, the author's interpretive community, etc. through lecture, discussion.

5. Evaluating

Students are asked to react to the issues originally discussed in prereading activities in light of their experiences with the text. See Figure 1. Not only are they to evaluate their previous beliefs and opinions, but they are asked to infer how others in differing interpretive communities would react to these issues.

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